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A TIME-EFFECTIVE, SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH TO COUPLE THERAPY

STEVEN FRIEDMAN
EVE LIPCHIK

Working effectively with couples is a complex and challenging endeavor. Differing perceptions between partners requires great sensitivity in acknowledging often strongly held yet divergent points of view while maintaining a working alliance with each member of the couple. In addition, faced with sometimes volatile and emotionally charged communications and affects, the couple therapist must manage high levels of reactivity in ways that offer the couple a path out of its members' problem-saturated reality. To meet these challenges, the time-effective, solution-focused therapist acts as a facilitator of the therapeutic conversation in ways that open space for the couple to move toward a preferred future. Working from a perspective of competencies and strengths, we take a nonpathologizing approach that respects the clients' goals and utilizes the clients' own resources and "expert knowledges" in reaching these goals (Friedman, 1997; Lipchik, 1993).

The work we do can be considered "minimalist" in that we aren't looking to reconstruct relationships by delving into partners' past individual histories to find relevant themes. While gathering information is part of any clinical contact, we envision our role less as "information

Donovan, James M. (1999) Short-Term Couple Therapy. Guilford Press, New York.

gatherers" and more as facilitators of the therapeutic conversation, using questions to help the couple construct new meanings and understandings about their relationship. Our attention is focused primarily on the here and now, and even more importantly, on the future, since the future provides a blank canvas on which the couple can paint a picture of the pair's wishes and hopes.

BACKGROUND/HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Our clinical practices are situated in a postmodern or social constructionist frame—in that we view the conversational process in therapy as a forum for meaning-making (e.g., de Shazer, 1994; Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Rather than uncovering objective truths, the therapeutic conversation allows the therapist and client to co-construct realities in ways that open space for new perspectives (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Friedman, 1993b; Gergen, 1985). Within any conversation there are multiple opportunities (i.e., ambiguities) for meaning making about events in people's lives. It is this conversational process and its ambiguities that offer client and therapist the maneuverability to create new stories.

Our approach grows out of the solution-focused tradition that dates back to the early 1980s and the pioneering work of the Brief Family Therapy Center (e.g., Berg, 1994; Berg & Miller, 1994; de Shazer, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994; Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993; Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; O'Hanlon & Wilk, 1987).[1] Solution-focused therapy builds on and complements the innovative work of the Mental Research Institute (MRI) (e.g., Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982) and the "uncommon" psychotherapy of Milton H. Erickson (e.g., see Haley, 1973). While drawing primarily on solution-focused methods, Friedman's work with couples (e.g., Friedman, 1996, 1997) also incorporates ideas from the domain of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990).

The solution-focused therapist joins with the couple in a collaborative relationship that builds on previous successes and problem "exceptions." While validating and respecting each partner's needs and wishes, our work aims to open space for "both/and" solutions (Lipchik, 1993; Lipchik & Kubicki, 1996). Since action outside the therapy room is necessary for change to occur, homework suggestions are used as a way for the couple to carry the work of the session into their day-to-day lives at home. Throughout the therapy process, we emphasize client strengths and resources. Rather than becoming immersed in the couple's problem-saturated story or in a litany of negative complaints, we redirect attention to those aspects of the relationship that are working and tailor homework assignments to the specifics of each couple's situation. This doesn't mean that the problem, or those affects that accompany the problem, are ignored, only that the problem story does not get central focus in the therapy. It's clear to us that staying in the "problem" frame can quickly lead to a sense of hopelessness and demoralization for both client and therapist (Friedman & Fanger, 1991). Because our goal is to engender hope and encourage movement, our attention stays focused primarily on ways the couple has found to take steps toward a more preferred future.

In many instances, fortuitous events in the life of the couple have a major impact on the change process (see Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997). By spacing contacts between sessions, the therapist allows the "normal restorative processes of life" to operate (Hobbs, 1966). In addition, allowing time between sessions provides an opportunity for the couple to implement homework suggestions. In general, because movement and change in therapy are unpredictable, the solution-focused therapist does not contract for a fixed number of sessions. Instead, plans for each future session are negotiated at the conclusion of the current one.

Research on the solution-focused therapies (summarized by De Jong & Hopwood, 1995; McKeel, 1995) supports their usefulness and effectiveness in a wide variety of clinical situations. These competency-based approaches place the client in the driver's seat in establishing goals and in deciding when these goals have been reached. This collaborative and cooperative stance is a primary factor in achieving successful outcomes in therapy (Whiston & Sexton, 1993).

As we will see, two primary ingredients influence the generation of positive outcomes in solution-focused therapy: (1) the language the therapist uses (to both develop a cooperative and collaborative relationship and engender hope) and 2) the use of tasks that engage the client in activities or actions that lead to new perspectives and behaviors.

CORE CONCEPTS

The basic assumptions of solution-focused, time-effective couple therapy are as follows:

- Every human being is unique.
- All relationships are unique.
- People have inherent and potential resources to help themselves.
- Change is constant and inevitable.

- You can't change the past, so concentrate on the present and future.
- Problems are experienced individually but can change interpersonally.
- There is no true cause and effect of problems.
- No situation is totally negative.
- A small change can lead to bigger changes.
- If something works don't fix it; if it doesn't, do something different.
- Therapists don't have the power or knowledge to change clients.
- You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

These assumptions can be translated into five major processes that define a time-effective, competency-based therapy (Figure 13.1).

1. *Connection*: Listening, affirming, and acknowledging each partner's story while joining with both around a set of mutually agreed-upon goals.

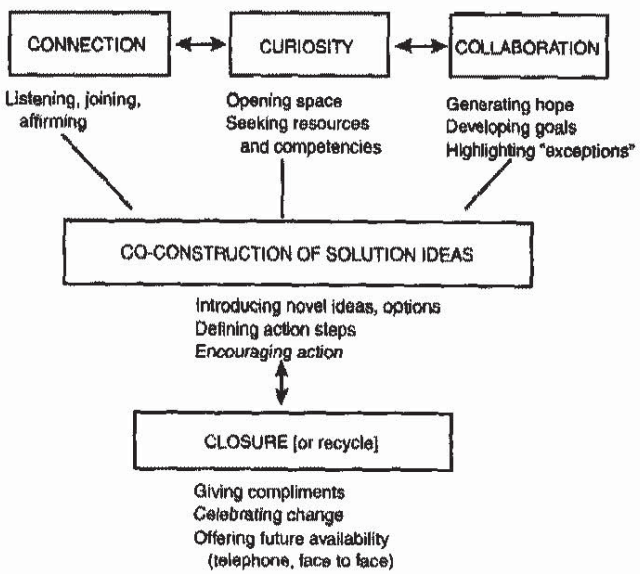

FIGURE 13.1. A competency-based model of time-effective therapy. From Friedman (1997, p. 234). Copyright 1997 by Allyn & Bacon. Reprinted by permission.

2. *Curiosity*: Opening space for a discussion of multiple perspectives while attending to the couple's resources.
3. *Collaboration*: Working together with both members the couple in the direction of *their* preferred futures. Highlighting successes ("exceptions") and generating hope.
4. *Co-Construction of solution ideas*: (a) Introducing novel ideas that emerge from the clinical conversation; (b) defining action steps ("homework").
5. *Closure*: Giving compliments; celebrating and applauding change; offering each partner an opportunity to acknowledge and comment on changes in the other; offering future availability.

THE PROCESS OF THERAPY

Establishing the Emotional Climate

The therapy process requires that the clinician establish a working alliance with the couple. To establish this alliance, and to maximize positive outcomes, we find the following actions on the part of the therapist necessary: respect for the client's point of view, empathy for the client's predicament, the engendering of hope and positive expectations, and genuineness and authenticity in the clinical interaction (Duncan & Moynihan, 1994; Frank, 1974; Miller et al., 1997). As Friedman (1997, p. 3) points out:

> All therapies . . . require sensitivity, patience, compassion, and an ability to listen for subtleties (Lipchik, 1994). Applying a set of principles blindly without attending to these aspects of the relationship will inevitably lead to clinical dead-ends. . . . Therapist flexibility is vital. The steps in the therapy cannot be neatly and algorithmically mapped out. As Milton Erickson emphasized, each therapy encounter must be *invented* based on the client's presentation. Therapy, being a recursive process, requires meeting clients at their points of readiness and shifting gears in light the subtleties of the clinical conversation.

Basically, the therapist uses the clients' reality about their situation as the basis for collaboration. The speed and success of solution construction depend on the therapist's ability to stay connected with the clients' reality throughout the course of therapy. This is the underpinning for the whole collaborative process, the grease that keeps the axles turning. Figure 13.2 provides an overview of the factors that contribute to establishing and maintaining a positive emotional climate (adapted from Lipchik, 1992).

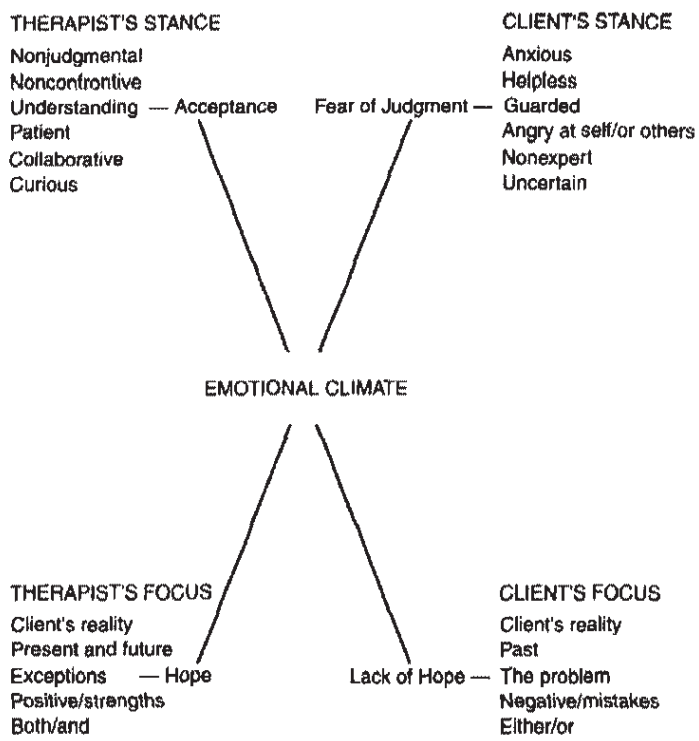

FIGURE 13.2. The climate and context of therapy.

Asking Pivotal Questions

The manner in which solution-focused therapists speak with clients (the questions used) both influences clients' expectations and optimism and directs the clients' attention to aspects of their lives that are indicative of change (Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986). When clients experience a sense of hopefulness and a positive expectancy about change, positive outcomes are more likely (see Friedman & Fanger, 1991; Miller et al., 1997; Whiston & Sexton, 1993). When, for example, a therapist asks about changes that happened prior to coming for the first session, he or she is already setting the stage for the client to tune into positive developments (Weiner-Davis, de Shazer, & Gingerich, 1987).

As we see in the transcript of Phil and Sherry below, a number of pivotal questions are used in the initial session, and thereafter, that support a positive, collaborative, and resource-oriented perspective (see Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986). The therapist keys in on "exceptions,"

that is, times when the problem isn't happening and uses these "sparkling moments" as building blocks for encouraging further change. The therapist also maintains a future focus by asking questions that allow each member of the couple to consider what his or her desired changes will look like (Kiser et al., 1993). For example, the therapist might ask,

> "How do you usually solve problems like this? What percentage of the time is this situation problematic compared to when things are working fairly well? What would a small change toward the goal look like? When this change begins to happen, what will you notice first? What might I notice about you (both of you) that would indicate that a change has happened? Who else might notice this change? When you're feeling loved (appreciated, respected, etc.) by your partner, what is he or she doing differently? How do you feel differently since you and your partner began to fight less?"

If the members of the couple aren't able to generate any "exceptions" to the problem, it's useful to ask the "miracle question" (de Shazer, 1988): "If a miracle happened tonight and you woke up the next morning and your problem were solved, how would things be different?" This question opens space for the couple to project a new future, one that doesn't include the problem. The partners' responses to this question provide a road map to the couple's preferred future.

When members of a couple are stuck in a blaming mode or pattern, it can be useful to externalize this "problem" or "pattern" (see Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993) as a force that is creating distance and conflict. Here the therapist aligns with the couple "against" the dominance of the "pattern." In effect, the person or couple is separated from the "problem." For example, the therapist might ask questions such as "How did this pattern of conflict take hold of your lives?" "In what ways have you acted contrary to this pattern?" "If this pattern continues to dominate your relationship, what do you anticipate will be the outcome?" "What would your relationship look like when this pattern is no longer dominant?," and so forth. If a couple continues in a negative mode, it can be useful to ask: "How come things aren't worse?" "What have you done to keep things from getting worse?"

In the course of therapy, it is also helpful to employ "scaling questions" (e.g., Berg & de Shazer, 1993). Scaling questions allow the members of a couple to place themselves along a scale from 0 to 10 on some dimension of their relationship. For example, partners can be asked to place themselves on a scale regarding their commitment to the relationship or to indicate their hopefulness in turning the situation around or

to tell you about where things were when they called for the appointment and where things are now.

Concluding the Session: The Summary Statement

Solution-focused therapy is often practiced as a team approach with one therapist in front of a one-way mirror interviewing the couple and one or more therapists behind it, observing. Sessions usually last about 1 hour. Whether working alone or with a team, the interviewing therapist usually takes a 5- to 10-minute consultation break about 40 to 45 minutes into the hour. The therapist reviews the session and composes (with the team or alone) a summary message to communicate to the client when the therapist returns to the room. The consultation break was first described by Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata (1978) using a different theoretical model.

The summation message consists of (1) feedback to the client (couple) on what the therapist heard during the session about why the two are coming for therapy and what their goals are; (2) compliments on positive steps already taken; (3) a framework or context in which to place the couple's predicament, (preferably one that emphasizes normal developmental processes); and (4) the suggestion of a task or homework assignment for the couple to experiment with between this session and the next. This suggestion is made tentatively, and clients are encouraged to modify the task as they wish.

The overall goal of the message is to provide the couple with a new or different perspective on their predicament while creating a comfortable emotional climate that engenders hope and positive expectations. So, for example, the therapist might begin by saying, "What I heard you say today is. . . . " This statement includes what the therapist heard the clients say (using the clients' language as much as possible), their goals, progress, and comments about their feelings or emotions. Next, the therapist offers compliments, reinforces positive changes, normalizes, reframes, or presents information from a developmental perspective. Finally, a suggestion is made. This can be as simple as "Continue doing what you're already doing" or one more specifically designed to guide the clients toward doing something different. In the transcript to follow, we present several examples of summation messages and therapeutic tasks.

PHIL AND SHERRY: A COUPLE IN DISTRESS

The following are excerpts from a series of interviews with a couple who were struggling, in an early stage of their marriage, to find a balance between their individual needs for autonomy and their wishes for closeness. The therapist is Eve Lipchik, who provides personal commentary on the therapy process. Steven Friedman also adds his thoughts at various points in the transcript.

The Initial Interview

Sherry, 27 and Phil, 39, were married only 9 months when Phil called to initiate couple counseling. Phil had been married previously, while Sherry had not. Six years ago, Phil, who had formerly been a flight instructor, changed careers and began his own commercial art business. He was recently experiencing a lot of stressful competition in this new line of work. Sherry supervised and trained in-flight personnel for an airline and was attending night classes to becomes certified as a school teacher.

Sherry signaled Phil to start talking about why he wanted counseling:

PHIL: For me its all about the nurturing I get, the kind of support that I get, and when I'm not supported, then I kind of have this little conversation like, "Why should I support her, if I'm not going to be supported?"

[Phil has offered some valuable information about himself at this point; he is aware of his pattern, and it is "tit for tat."]

LIPCHIK: Of course . . . and by support, you mean . . . ?

PHIL: Just encouragement or acceptance. If she doesn't attack or doesn't criticize.

LIPCHIK: So nurturing means being warmly accepted or supported?

PHIL: Uh huh.

LIPCHIK: And how about you, Sherry?

SHERRY: For me it's just not doing the things that could make it good. It's, you know, being highly critical, or feeling like I'm under attack or feeling like my opinion doesn't matter. And again, it's all feelings, but it's very real to me.

LIPCHIK: Sure.

SHERRY: Part of it is communication . . . we both approach communication differently. Where if I ask a question, and I ask, uh, "What are you hungry for?" or "Where do you want to go for supper?" Phil

might say, "Oh, I'm hungry for pizza, let's go to the pizza place," and I say, "Oh, gee, I'm not really hungry for pizza, I'm hungry for something else"—Phil will say "I don't want to argue about it." Well, I'm not arguing, I'm discussing. Is he, like, really hungry for pizza and just couldn't do for anything else, or is he just kind of neutral? Or am I kinda neutral and just kind of leaning toward something versus really wanting something.

[The focus should now be on defining a goal both partners can agree on. This was difficult for Sherry and Phil. At first they only agreed on the fact that they argue 80% of the time. Also, both acknowledged that the other was hurting equally as a result of this arguing. This admission was chosen as the "resource" upon which to build the goal.]

LIPCHIK: So you both agree, the other one feels as bad as you do?. . . . Any ideas what the solution might be?

[Since I believe that clients, generally, have good ideas about creating change, I asked them directly about potential solutions.]

PHIL: I have a real clear idea what the solution is.

LIPCHIK: Yeah?

PHIL: Uhm. (*Looks at Sherry, who is laughing.*) Is it okay if I say?

SHERRY: Yes. Just laughing to myself.

PHIL: Why?

SHERRY: 'Cause . . . you know everything, so go ahead.

PHIL: So it's not out of my knowing everything that I speak it's . . . it's answering the question. Uhm, I guess I forgot what you said.

LIPCHIK: What the solution might be?

PHIL: Yeah, the solution to me would be . . . uhm . . . simply acceptance.

LIPCHIK: On Sherry's part? On your part?

PHIL: Well, for both of us.

LIPCHIK: Oh, for both of you.

PHIL: If we both . . . got rid of the shields and armor and weapons for protection . . . and got rid of the fears . . . any quick reaction or fright or, "You didn't do this 'cause," or "I didn't get that," or any of those things, just leave them aside.

LIPCHIK: (*to Sherry*) What do you think?

SHERRY: Uhm, I guess it's a similar idea but uhm . . . the only solution I see, because, there is a lack of . . . I have lost a lot of trust in our rela- . . . in Phil, in our relationship.

LIPCHIK: Trust . . . in terms of . . . ?

SHERRY: . . . His judgment, trusting that he's really my partner, trusting that he's in this relationship to be my partner and not to criticize me or be cynical . . .

LIPCHIK: And if by some miracle that trust would [be] there tomorrow . . . how would you know . . . What would the signs be?

[Here I asked a modified form of the "miracle question" in the hope that Sherry would be more specific about signs of change.]

SHERRY: There would be that respect. . . . I wouldn't be criticized. . . . he would recognize my accomplishments. . . . Yes . . . I would feel really respected, and he would also get that from me.

LIPCHIK: Can you give me an example of a time when that happened?

SHERRY: It's his attitude. . . . it would just be different.

LIPCHIK: What do you think, Phil?

PHIL: I will feel pretty much loved and trusted . . . when there is a sense of love or caring.

LIPCHIK: What will Sherry be doing when you feel that?

PHIL: It's not any one thing . . . I will feel support.

[These clients seemed not to want to talk about positives but only to complain about each other. To persist asking about positives could lead to them feeling misunderstood. I chose to ask them when they thought the problem started. This line of questioning requires careful monitoring to avoid becoming immersed in problem-talk.

Both partners dated the beginning of the tension back to the end of summer. Sherry admitted that at that time she began not to like being married because "I was feeling the extra responsibility and that I had to live up to . . . all these expectations and standards." She also recognized that some of those expectations were hers, not Phil's.]

SHERRY: I started school in September, and Phil began to take seminars, and all of a sudden we started to have more problems. It got very demanding. . . . I started requesting more, requesting that certain house things stay this way, because I don't have time to pick up anymore; I don't have time to clean the house. Time became a real issue

for me, and so Phil would make these promises and then not keep them and then act like it was no big deal that he didn't keep them. . . . I was angry that he made promises he didn't keep. So it started with the little things like that, and it just grew to the point where at the end of November I decided to stop smoking—after 10 years of smoking—thinking I would have this hugely supportive husband who's always wanted me to—I mean we've seen each other for 7 years, and he's wanted me to stop smoking—so I'd finally made this big decision "Okay, I'll stop smoking," and the day I stopped, he started ragging at me over some other thing. I asked him to be understanding and try to be nice to me anyway. . . . so when he didn't do that, when he got nasty anyway and belligerent, that really broke down the trust. Maybe it's school and the holidays. Maybe it's those things combined just causing so much stress and anxiety. I always thought that we would just work this out, you know, that it would calm down. I think when I was out of school we got along better, you know, because there's less stress. Less things to do. He wasn't taking any seminars. We were home together more.

[As Sherry spoke, Phil had been nodding in agreement. It turned out that their schedules were so full that they had little time together during the week and many chores to do on the weekends. At this point, I was experiencing both partners as increasingly discouraged but less eager to complain. This suggested to me that they might be ready to work on defining a goal based on positives and avoid further problem-talk.]

LIPCHIK: What's enjoyable about being together?

SHERRY: We laugh, and we share stories and ideas.

PHIL: There is so much spontaneity, fun, craziness. [He describes an elaborate birthday dinner she had prepared for him recently.]

[As the couple relaxed and talked about the positives in their relationship, I tried again to get them to delineate some small behavioral shifts that would indicate positive change.]

LIPCHIK: Can you give me a little bit of an idea what will be the first thing you notice when things get better?

SHERRY: I would notice, uhm, it's hard to explain. . . . but I would notice Phil was accepting what I was saying without arguing or fighting or being corrected or rephrasing what I'm saying. General acceptance, I guess I would notice something like. Is that . . . ?

LIPCHIK: Yeah.

PHIL: For me it would be . . . willing to be free. . . . I don't know, this isn't coming out right. Just give me a moment.

LIPCHIK: You would notice . . . ?

PHIL: No, just wait, wait a minute. . . . That Sherry would be supportive . . .

LIPCHIK: Could you tell me what that would look like by giving me a specific example?

PHIL: (*long silence*) I'm having a hard time with this.

LIPCHIK: Well, you don't have to answer.

PHIL: (*to Sherry*) To me it looks like you're just friendlier.

LIPCHIK: Uh huh, you'd see a smile on her face?

PHIL: Well I enjoy sharing my day or sharing my frustrations, and sharing my joys, and I like those to be nurtured and for an exchange to take place.

LIPCHIK: Paid attention to?

PHIL: Sort of, more or less. I mean, I don't like talking to the air, you know.

Phil obviously had a hard time translating his feelings into behavioral terms. In order to be helpful to him I will have to work on understanding his way of cooperating. At this point in the interview, I took a break and left the room to develop a summation message. By removing myself from the intensity of the session, I was able more easily to get perspective to formulate a feedback statement that captured the spirit of the interview while providing a context for the therapy. The couple was also left in a state of anticipation that may increase their openness and receptivity to the message.

LIPCHIK: What I heard you say today is that you've been married for about 9 months, and you've come because your relationship is increasingly conflictual. You, Sherry, said you feel criticized and attacked that your opinions don't count. Phil, you described your dissatisfaction as not getting the kind of nurturing and support you want. You both seem to feel your communication needs improvement and that you need to be less reactive to each other.

My response is that I found both of you to be very clear and open about how you described your situation. It struck me that, in spite of your differences, you both want the same thing in the rela-

tionship—understanding, respect, and support. . . . and both of you seem to be hurting a great deal. I was impressed that you acknowledged each other's pain. Often people are so focused on their own pain, they don't even notice that the other person is hurting too.

One thing I was thinking is that you're in a transitional stage in your relationship. You may be moving from the romantic stage—where love is blind—and people just try to be what they think their partner wants—toward more emotional intimacy. A lot of people get stuck at that point, and it feels really scary because suddenly differences seem to come out. But for love and trust to grow, people have to be themselves and accept each other with differences . . . and negotiate them in a way that works for both of them.

These transitions in relationships are normal. . . . You may just have experienced it more intensely because you got so busy in the fall and suddenly couldn't spend much time together anymore. It's a good thing you're coming for help early, rather than letting it go too long.

What I usually do when I see a couple is to see them each alone one time before I see them together. It just gives us a chance to connect individually. Is that all right with you? (*They both nod in agreement.*) I would also like to suggest something for you to think about. Think about and notice what is happening in your relationship that you want to continue to have happen. You told me a lot about what you want to change, now it would help me to learn from you about what you don't want to change. I would suggest you do this separately . . . don't share it.

The couple decided that Phil would be interviewed first, and this appointment is scheduled for 2 weeks later. I always see couples separately one time after the initial conjoint session for several reasons: (1) It allows for closer joining with each partner; (2) the individual session can help clarify the amount of responsibility each partner is willing to assume for the problem and solutions; (3) if a confession of an affair or interest in another person is made, it serves as an opportunity to educate the partner about the impossibility of working on the marriage while one is engaged in a competing relationship. When such information is disclosed and the person insists he or she wants to improve the marriage, I tell the client that one cannot work on one relationship while having another. I suggest the client consider ending the other relationship, or at least agree to a period of no contact, while the marital therapy is occurring. If this suggestion is refused, I inform both partners in a conjoint session that I recommend that they seek separate help until they're both clear about their commitment to improving the marriage.[2]

Individual Session with Phil

Phil came in carrying a pad, prepared to take notes during our session.

LIPCHIK: How are you doing?

PHIL: Good.

LIPCHIK: I just want to explain to you why I have these separate sessions. Sometimes people like to tell me things without their partners present. This is an opportunity to do so. It may be helpful to you, and it is often helpful to me. What we discuss is confidential. If there is something I would like to discuss with your partner present I would ask your permission to do so first. Okay?

PHIL: That's fine.

LIPCHIK: So is there anything like that on your mind?

PHIL: Well, not really right now. But since the last time we saw you, it's been. . . . 50–50 in terms of good and bad.

[Since this move from 20–80 to 50–50 is a positive development, I took this as an opportunity to explore what made the difference.]

LIPCHIK: What accounts for this improvement?

PHIL: We're making a more conscious effort to get along better. That exercise you gave us cut through the negative stuff that was accumulating for us. It got both of us beyond all that junk that was going on—that was nice ground to begin on and helped both of us.

[Phil then went on to discuss Sherry's frequent complaint that he's not a real "partner." It was apparent that they had very different ideas of what that meant. For her it seemed to mean that he was thinking of her as well as of himself, while for him it seemed to mean he should give up doing what he wanted to do in order to please her.

He reported that they had, however, had a good talk after going to church. He had asked her to start telling him when he is being the partner she wanted instead of when he wasn't. On Monday she did something different: She called him from the office and shared her week's schedule with him. He reported that he told her how much he appreciated that and that it made him feel cared for. I tried to build on this, but he did not want to pursue further positives.]

PHIL: I feel I get verbally beaten up. I see things differently than she does. She doesn't let me in on what she *likes*, but she flares up

about every little thing she doesn't. I have to choose my words carefully to avoid flare-ups. . . . At the end of the session last time you said we are both hurting. We really are similar in many ways, and we both take a stand to show the other how wrong they are. Maybe a good way for me to approach things would be to think of her side of things?

LIPCHIK: Well, that's something to consider. . . . It's always good to speculate about her side as well as yours, but it might lead to your making assumptions that aren't really so. What works well for many people is to actually ask your partner where they're coming from . . . what they are feeling or thinking.

[Phil confessed that in his first marriage he had been a "controlling jerk." He was determined not to make the same mistakes in this marriage. He wanted to be "truthful and honest and express emotions clearly and talk about them . . . everything I didn't do then. . . . " In this marriage he has been trying to accommodate in order to avoid conflict rather than to control and manipulate. He has found that this isn't working with Sherry, who considered his direct statements authoritarian and negative when they weren't meant to be.]

PHIL: If I stop believing that behaving *this* way is wrong, too, I have nothing . . . where am I going to go with it then?

LIPCHIK: It may be a question of different perceptions, not right or wrong. It doesn't have to be either/or . . . win/lose. . . . it's supposed to be win/win. You have different but complementary styles of expressing yourself. You are more direct; she's more tentative. What will you have to know about her style so you can express yourself in a way that doesn't cramp your style?

PHIL: That's good . . . that's good. If you put it in terms of different style . . . that clicks for me.

At the conclusion of the session, I excused myself and prepared a summary message to present to Phil.

LIPCHIK: What I heard you say today is that you found the exercise to be useful and that you noticed it had some positive effect because it helped both of you to try harder to improve things. You also said that you had put a lot of work into figuring out what went wrong in your first marriage, and you're determined to not make the same mistakes in this one. However, you said that the approach you're trying with Sherry, not to be controlling and to be honest with yourself and with her, isn't working either, and you are very discouraged about it.

My response is that you both seem to want respect and love from each other, not criticism and disdain . . . but because you are different people . . . have different styles . . . you may have *to express it* in a different way than you want to have it *expressed to you*. You're certainly on the right track in trying to learn what Sherry wants in a partner by asking her to let you know when she thinks you're meeting her expectations. My suggestion would be that you keep on asking for more positive feedback from her and let her know, as well, when she's acting in a way that makes you feel good.

Individual Session with Sherry

Two weeks later I met with Sherry, who also came with a notebook ready to take notes. I introduced the reason for the individual session to Sherry. She said she really didn't know what to say because counseling was really new to her.

LIPCHIK: So what's been different?

[The purpose of asking this simple yet pivotal question is to cue Sherry to select and recall happenings in her life that reflect some change from the status quo. Since change is ever present, this question provides an opportunity for Sherry to recall or remember what has been different over the past 2 weeks.]

SHERRY: I think—maybe we're paying more attention to things so we're getting along a bit better—more good moments. At the same time, some of the bad things are more explosive. I think, for me, when I get frustrated, there are moments when I wonder if this [marriage] is right.

LIPCHIK: What's your gut feeling?

SHERRY: My gut feeling is that we can work it out.

[She described some improvement in their ease of talking with each other and a general lessening of tension. But she wanted to get back to the theme of Phil not acting like "a real partner."]

SHERRY: We're both home . . . going to have breakfast. He fixes what he wants to eat and doesn't ask me what I want. I might as well live

alone. When we came home from visiting my parents at Easter, he unpacked his things and left mine in the trunk . . .

I found out a while ago that he just says "Yes" to everything in order to avoid arguments. I didn't notice it at first until he started getting shorter with me and more sarcastic. I was furious. He made the decision to be that way with me without telling me. This is not partnership. I didn't like it. I asked him to stop doing that, but he still does it once in a while . . . He gives me short answers. I don't think it's funny. He uses those short answers or "okays" as pacifiers. That's not a partnership! It's a put down. It just ignores who I am.

[I attempt to broaden her view to "both/and."]

LIPCHIK: I see your point. On the other hand, people usually have to make choices about how to respond to others, especially when it's someone they care for a lot. Sometimes putting your needs aside can be loving . . . giving of yourself. I can see that in this situation it makes you feel he wasn't respecting your needs. . . . including you. How will he have to behave in the future for you to feel validated and for him to be able to express his side of things?

[Individual sessions can facilitate change for both partners because they offer an opportunity to address individual and/or couple issues in a less threatening manner.]

Sherry continued by sharing her confusion about the boundary between herself as a woman and her role as Phil's wife. I asked her several questions about this. For example: What would be going on if she were able to describe herself as a wife and feel positive about it? What would have to be different for her to feel okay both as an individual and a wife? In what respect is this happening already? At the end of this discussion, I excused myself and prepared a summary message as follows:

LIPCHIK: What I heard you tell me today is that sometimes you have doubts about your relationship, but that in spite of that, you're invested in making it work. You seem not to have been able to figure out yet how you can assume the role of a wife without giving up aspects of yourself that define you as a woman separate from being a wife. On the other hand, Phil's attitude toward you—how he affirms your opinions and how considerate he is of you—seems to be an important part of figuring that out for yourself. You also told me that, when you focus on the positive things in the relationship, things go better for you and Phil and are more relaxed.

My response is that you seem to be on the right track and, in order to stay on the right track, have made the decision to come for some help sooner rather than later. I am impressed with how well you know yourself and Phil and how much thought you give to finding a solution. You have some good ideas about what you might do differently to help the situation . . . like letting Phil know how you feel sooner before you get so angry. You are right that some of the things you value about each other—the competitiveness, the strong opinions—are the very things that also cause problems. I have a suggestion you might want to try until we meet again . . . Notice what you do to overcome the urge to react to Phil in an emotional, competitive way and what you are doing differently when you respond in a way that works for both of you. Don't expect instant success, this will take time. It's all about changing habits.

[Again, I used Sherry's motivation and her own ideas to suggest a task that would lead toward greater acceptance of each partner's differences.]

Second Conjoint Session

The second meeting with both members of the couple took place about 2 weeks later. Sherry and Phil looked very upset and tense as they entered the room and sat down. They both reported that things had been "terrible." Phil said they had been doing very well for about 1 week after their individual sessions: Communication was better; they were having good conversations. He had felt a sense of "freedom and support" until the past weekend when they had had a fight that wiped out any progress. Phil described that he had wanted to talk to Sherry on Saturday morning about some of the difficulties with one of his clients. They were in the kitchen making breakfast. She was just in the process of making pancakes and sausages and arranging them on the plates when he was describing the situation. He felt she had responded critically and told him what he should have done before she even heard the end of the story. He felt invalidated. Sherry's side of the story was that the minute she asked a question he became defensive. She felt invalidated first by his not wanting to answer her questions and then by his "rudeness." As their interaction escalated, he had taken his plate of food and went into the living room to eat by himself. They didn't talk for the rest of the weekend.

Sherry, too, expressed her feelings of discouragement. She had begun to hope they had left the past behind and were on a new path because things had been going so well for over a week. It's quite common for clients to report some positive changes after the first session

and then come back with more complaints instead of reports of progress. That's why it's always useful to suggest going very slowly and not expect too much change too soon. The therapist's task is both to communicate acceptance for what clients are reporting and to search for difference to promote hope and motivation.

LIPCHIK: It sounds like you're both very angry and disappointed that things didn't continue to go so well. I wonder, though, if you could tell me what was different about this fight than past ones?

PHIL: Nothing. . . . nothing. . . .

SHERRY: It was even more discouraging because things had been so good.

LIPCHIK: I know it may have felt the same—even worse—but was there anything about this fight that was different than past ones?

SHERRY: Well. . . . uhm . . . it felt . . . uhm . . . well actually, in the past when we fought I'd ask him to leave . . .

PHIL: (*interrupting*) The first thing is always "Why don't you just leave!"

SHERRY: . . . but this time we just stewed . . .

PHIL: She didn't throw me out as usual . . . I stayed in the other room most of the day . . . We didn't talk.

SHERRY: Maybe it was different . . . we gave each other enough space to get it together by Sunday night.

The couple described the small, but significant, difference in this situation and began to appear more hopeful again. I asked them both to scale their level of confidence that their relationship will work out. Sherry said 75%, while Phil said 50%. One thing that became increasingly clear to me in talking with this couple and watching them take notes during sessions was that they both had a background in teaching and that they saw themselves as "students" in this situation. Their way of cooperating for change was to want to "learn" how to get along. They had responded well to the first task and expected more homework assignments. Their competitive manner was something that had originally attracted them to each other and had to be utilized in a positive manner instead of being seen as a liability. The following is the summation message I gave after this session.

LIPCHIK: What I hear today is that you're both disappointed that some of the gains made after our first sessions didn't continue at the same level. You both reported how happy you felt when there was less tension and you could talk with each other in a relaxed manner, but then you found yourself again in an argument that made you feel as though you hadn't made any gains. Both of you reported on how hurt you feel when your partner is not valuing what you have to offer. However, you did report that, while very similar to other fights, this one was a bit different because you found a way to stay in the apartment *together* until you could work things out.

My response is that you are both strong, emotional people who value your individualism but that you need each other to affirm that individualism. When you're able to do that for each other, it's really good. But when you have even the slightest doubt about the other's belief and admiration for your individual self, you react very strongly, and things break down. While it's normal and healthy for partners in a relationship to want to be very close while maintaining a sense of separateness—Both an "I" and a "we"—some people find that when things go well too long in terms of their closeness, their individuality begins to feel threatened, and they need some distance for personal comfort. Many people aren't quite aware when they need that distance, and they may create it in a negative way by fighting without wanting to do that. I was wondering if you may want to see if that's the case for you?

An exercise I would suggest is to predict separately, and without sharing with each other, whether you think the next day will be a good day or a bad one in terms of your relationship. The next evening you get together and share whether your prediction was right or wrong. You must accept the other person's decision without asking how they reached it or why. If you find that for three nights in a row you predicted things would be good, you must toss a coin and the person who wins the coin toss must do something the next day to create distance. Then you begin the process all over again.

[For a homework assignment to be effective, it needs to emerge from the clinical conversation and be specifically tailored to the ongoing themes presented. The task presented here was designed to counteract the couple's reactiveness toward each other and to provide, in a playful yet planned way, an opportunity for this couple engage in an activity that would allow them to regulate their closeness/distance. The task also served to normalize "bad days" as something that can be expected from time to time in any relationship.]

Third Conjoint Session

At this session, held 2 weeks later, the couple came in relaxed and smiling. They reported that they had done the exercise and had had some

good days and some bad days. This is the solution-focused therapist's cue to attend to the changes as carefully as possible in order to reinforce them. Phil said he never actually predicted any bad days, whereas Sherry had predicted 2 days and that was right after they had left the last session. Sherry reported that they had had to create distance twice. One day she had the opportunity and one day Phil did.

SHERRY: But that was interesting because now I think we saw how much we react to one another.

LIPCHIK: Did you?

SHERRY: Well, yeah, because someone's creating distance, and all of a sudden you find yourself reacting to whatever they're doing even when you know that it could be on purpose . . . But, I don't know . . . I'm so wired I'm babbling.

PHIL: Go ahead.

SHERRY: It was funny because when I left I didn't know how that conclusion was drawn, that our space or our person was invaded at some point in our relationship, and I still don't know where that came from. Uhm, or what we said that would make you think that or whatever. But I thought well, I'll still do the exercise and I did, and at the very least it got us talking about how our days are going. And we agreed then not to talk about whether it was bad or it was good, and there was no huge discussion because at times it probably could have gotten into another . . .

LIPCHIK: You didn't argue about whether it was good or bad?

SHERRY: No. We just decided and then if, if someone said it was bad, it was bad, and that was it. And we didn't discuss why it was bad.

LIPCHIK: But that's sort of different from your normal ways of saying that "It's my way." How come you just agreed and not argued about whether it was either/or?

SHERRY: Well that was part of the instruction, first of all. Or how we both understood the instructions. And, it's funny, the first day that I got to create distance was the first day we really wanted to talk about it. 'Cause Phil said the next day, "Now were you really trying to create distance, or were you just doing that, or . . . ?"

PHIL: Or reacting?

SHERRY: "Which was it, was it just you or were you trying to do that?" And I said, you just have to take it as me creating distance and that's it, and of course I wanted to go on and talk about something else, but he said, "But Sherry we can't talk it about too much." But that was good because then we didn't have to get to that point of beating a dead dog. Because we'll each go on and on about what we thought.

LIPCHIK: So was that better for the relationship?

SHERRY: You can answer this time.

PHIL: I think so. I guess it's better for both of us which I guess means it's better for the relationship. I want to talk about the exercise for a minute. I found it very difficult to create the distance when I was supposed to. I had to first stop and look at what it feels like to be close, what was I doing that was caring. So I had kind of an opposite reaction, and when I had to create distance, I had to really think about what I had to do to create distance. And then I tried some things and I found it so humorous that I couldn't really. . . . So I kind of removed the cloud over the relationship in terms of the volatility of it. I see that this is a great exercise for us. 'Cause we told you that things go really good and all of a sudden *cabam*! Everything explodes. And the line between the beauty and the beast is so fine that we never notice it.

SHERRY: Wow.

PHIL: I mean that's how I see it. We told you also that we can get along about a week, and your reaction to us was good. Three days. If we can get through 3 days . . .

LIPCHIK: A week is too long?

PHIL: Yeah. And so, we go "Okay, we'll do 3 days," and I wanted to talk about stuff. We have a good day; we have a bad day.

SHERRY: You wanted to talk about what made those bad days?

PHIL: (*speaking to Sherry*) Yeah, I wanted to know what your reaction was or what your thoughts were on just purely how you evaluated that as good or bad. I wanted to ask well, what percent you were actually creating distance and what percent you were . . .

SHERRY: Right.

PHIL: 'Cause I had a really hard time creating distance. I mean I just found it very amusing.

SHERRY: I did have a hard time too. I thought, "How am I going to do this?" because everything was going really nicely. But it wasn't just 3 good days. Each day preceding the 3 in a row got better and better.

But like I said, if one of us thought it was a bad day for one reason or another, then that was that, even though 90% of the day could have been good. Anyway, I had to think about "What am I going to do to create distance?" "How can I make it noticeable?" It was humorous only in the way that I knew exactly what I could do to do that. It was, uhm, like well "I know this topic," or "If I bring this up, I know that kind of pushes one button." "Or if I have this topic . . . " But then again, I didn't just want an argument. If I wanted to create distance, I had to do it a little more carefully.

PHIL: It was interesting to be on the other end of it too because I know what her goal is! I'm monitoring myself 'cause I don't want to be manipulated because I know that she's supposed to create distance.

SHERRY: (*laughing*)

PHIL: So I checked myself out on how I'm acting and reacting. It's pretty amusing.

SHERRY: But you'd be reacting so quickly. That's what I found most amusing . . .

PHIL: Uh huh.

SHERRY: It's like, boy, it doesn't take much. Even when we know what each other's doing, we still can be set off like that.

PHIL: Also I found another good thing about it, was that I felt a success. You know you go 3 days, we had a target, we had 3 days where we had to achieve something . . .

SHERRY: Right.

PHIL: So just setting it up in that framework, I found myself being more cognizant of how I had to react . . . 'cause I wanted to achieve the 3 days. When we achieved the 3 days I acknowledged myself, and I acknowledged Sherry, and we acknowledged each other and said "Well, this is good," and then we flipped the coin either way and that was it.

LIPCHIK: So there was a push to accomplish the 3 days?

PHIL: Well, for me, that was something I felt.

LIPCHIK: (*to Sherry*) Okay, okay. Did you feel that way?

SHERRY: No, uh uh. Especially at the beginning, and we went through quite a few days before we even got to 3 days. I guess on those three days I thought, "Oh well, if this is good, we're pretty distant," and then it became more of a playful thing. Like, "Careful, this is the 3rd day." You know, something like that.

LIPCHIK: Yeah.

SHERRY: No I guess I didn't have that goal. It was more that I wanted to see . . .

LIPCHIK: At 3 days did you think you could do 4 or 5 without distance?

PHIL: Uh huh. I thought it would be a logical progression that we would do 4 [days] next and then do 5 next and then do 6 and 7 and just start thinking about that . . .

SHERRY: Ha ha! Don't think!

PHIL: So much for what I think is logical! (*laughing*) It might be asking for disaster too, you know, how long can you go.

SHERRY: The last time we had the 3 days though—I don't remember when it was . . . The last time you got to create the distance, I was really ready for some distance. It wasn't because of our relationship necessarily, but at work I was starting to feel real bogged down, so with distance, I felt like I could be more just by myself, to myself.

LIPCHIK: What does that say about what you need from each other at times even when things are going well in the relationship?

SHERRY: It's a time issue. When we're creating distance or even arguing, I can just, not can, but do, go off into my own thing.

LIPCHIK: Uh huh.

SHERRY: I may not leave the house, but I do my school work, or I just completely block everything out. Where if there isn't distance, and everything's going fine, I guess I feel an obligation to talk more or to communicate more . . .

LIPCHIK: Well do you think you can have both? . . .

SHERRY: Yeah.

LIPCHIK: How can you do that without Phil taking it personally?

During the rest of the session, the couple also discussed how the two could communicate differently so that they do not take the need to have some space as personal rejection. Phil also said that he learned to accept Sherry more for who she was because he could not ask for reasons for her predictions, and Sherry agreed that she felt more accepted and had become more accepting of herself. They also spent time in the session discussing their different styles of closeness. They concluded that Phil had a greater need and tolerance for closeness than Sherry who withdrew when she had her fill. The more stress she felt on a daily basis,

the more space she needed, whereas the more stress Phil experienced the more closeness he wanted.

At the conclusion of this session I prepared a summary message as follows:

LIPCHIK: What I heard today is how hard you worked on this exercise, how much you both got out of it. You both seem to have learned so much about how different you are in some ways, like about your need for closeness under stress, and your similarities in others. You really should pat yourself and each other on the back for working so hard on this. It isn't easy to learn to control your urges and curiosity.

I was also impressed with how open and honest you were about all your reactions. Since the exercise was so useful, you may just want to continue to do it . . . but you may figure out a variation on the pattern . . . like 3 days, or 4 days . . . or whatever you can agree on. I do want to say though, it might be useful to think of this as a good beginning . . . like the beginning of a new pattern, as opposed to a solution that is in place. Sometimes it takes time to develop new patterns and new habits. If there are reoccurrences of problems, this should not be seen as a setback, but as an opportunity to learn more about how to prevent them in the future. So it makes sense to be patient and keep working at it.

Another session was scheduled for three weeks later.

Fourth Conjoint Session

Sherry and Phil were beaming when they entered the room. They reported that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being excellent, they were at a 9 or 10, 95% of the time since the last meeting. "It's magic!" is how they described the changes.

LIPCHIK: What was different?

SHERRY: We had a couple of bad days . . .

PHIL: Yeah, uh huh.

SHERRY: . . . where we said, "Oh, it's just a bad day, we might as well start over again."

LIPCHIK: Now what about that?

SHERRY: In fact, it was our first 3 days after we saw you. We were on to our 4th day, and we decided the 4th day was a bad day, so then we had to start over again, and we had to only work with 3 days at a time. So we decided if we had a bad day before 4 days then we can handle that.

LIPCHIK: Uh huh.

SHERRY: But after that we got 5 days in.

LIPCHIK: Well what about the bad days? How is it different now having a bad day than it was before?

SHERRY: It didn't last for 3 days. (*laughing*) But that's the same as last time.

LIPCHIK: How is it different?

PHIL: You're the one who always gets the coin toss, coin toss, coin toss.

SHERRY: I don't think it's very different, but when I get the coin toss, you always end up starting to do it (*laughing*).

PHIL: That's interesting. I always get myself ready . . .

SHERRY: Yeah, but he'll actually do it . . .

PHIL: . . . for rejection or something (*laughing*).

SHERRY: Uhhm, what was the question? I'm really . . .

LIPCHIK: How are the bad days different?

SHERRY: Oh, I think that it's, they're not as bad.

LIPCHIK: How do you explain that?

SHERRY: It's not anger, well it's still anger. We each might raise our voice and we . . . Well I, in order to break away from an argument I have to get away from it for a while, and that's how one of them went, I know. And on another one, Phil came up to me before, before I would have said anything about it and just started talking about it . . . We seemed more receptive to each other in fixing it, don't you think? In talking about it and saying "Okay I'm sorry, I hurt your feelings, I'm sorry," rather than about why it hurt your feelings and how, you know . . .

LIPCHIK: Uh huh.

SHERRY: So, (*to Phil*) what do you think of that?

LIPCHIK: If your life were to go on in this pattern, would that be okay? Would you consider that a good relationship?

PHIL: Yeah, I would . . .

SHERRY: Uh huh, pretty good.

PHIL: What's interesting about where these little breakdowns have occurred is that prior to seeing you and this exercise, this could [have gone] on for days. You know this, yadda yadda, bickering . . .

SHERRY: Yeah, 4 or 5 days, pretty awful.

PHIL: So what's going on now is it's getting off [that pattern] real fast.

SHERRY: We do. I guess that's it.

PHIL: And seeing what, where it is, what's going on and what you're committed to, and is it really important or what's the issue . . .

SHERRY: Yeah. I find myself asking myself . . .

PHIL: And after that it's like some silence, hmm, you know, what's the cost, and this is ridiculous. So I find that we get off, we get away from the junk and start talking and start hearing yourself and hearing the other person, and then you say, what're we doing here, this is really pretty stupid, where are we trying to go with this conversation?

SHERRY: And this far, we're both receptive to that. If one of us says something to bring it in another direction like, "We don't really want to do this," the other person always seems to be receptive to that, where before we weren't. "Did you mean to talk about that?" "Yes I did, and I meant to say this too!!" Uhm, I don't know why we're not doing that though.

LIPCHIK: It sounds like you're not angry at each other.

SHERRY: Pardon?

LIPCHIK: Is it because you're not as angry at each other?

SHERRY: That could be . . . Good answer.

(*at the end of the session*)

LIPCHIK: Well, should we stop at this point, should we have more sessions or is this good enough?

[I raise the issue of termination here, since the relationship is now on a more positive trajectory, and both partners seem satisfied with their progress. As the reader may have noticed, the amount of laughter and general, good-natured bantering has significantly increased in the third and fourth sessions—a very positive sign.]

PHIL: Well, I wouldn't mind just having a 6-week . . . what do you think of that . . . ?

LIPCHIK: Quality check . . .

PHIL: Just sort of . . .

SHERRY: (*laughing*) Four- to 6-week checkup.

PHIL: Just to do it. I mean this is sort of new, it really is sort of new considering that we've had extreme up and downs, and this is probably the most balance that we've had in our interactions . . .

SHERRY: Uh huh.

PHIL: Controlled balance. And I wouldn't mind coming back, in say 4 to 6 weeks. (*to therapist*) I don't know what you think of that.

LIPCHIK: It might be a good idea to come in one more time . . . and certainly you could cancel the session if you felt you didn't need it.

In the summation message, I acknowledged and applauded the progress they had made. I made one suggestion:

> "Every time you have a negative thought about the other, and there's no way that doesn't happen in the best of marriages, that you follow it with a positive thought. Like, 'Ugh, he's irritable today, or she's cranky, but he was so considerate. . . . she was so supportive yesterday . . . etc.' You need to maintain your balance between the good and the occasional bad. There can be times when there are 2 or even 3 bad days in a row, and it doesn't mean the relationship isn't good. I'm hoping you can keep up your confidence and not get scared. So getting into the habit of thinking a positive thought along with a negative one can build up your strength to handle the more difficult times."

Follow-Up Contacts

Sherry and Phil canceled the follow-up session and said they were doing so well they didn't need to come in. Ten months later I saw them for one session. They appeared to be very angry with each other and recited similar complaints to those presented at the first session. It turned out that they were experiencing a time of extreme stress. Both of Phil's parents were ill, and the couple had been spending the past 4 weekends traveling 5 hours to Phil's hometown to cook and clean for them. Phil was very appreciative of Sherry's efforts but felt she had little energy left for him. Phil was also in the process of deciding to give up his failing business and to look for another job. Meanwhile, Sherry was feeling a lot of responsibility to support both of them.

I asked them what they believed had been most helpful to them as a result of our past sessions, and they immediately realized that they had fallen back into an old unsatisfying pattern: Phil needing extra support when he was under stress and Sherry needing more space. I used scaling

questions to get them to evaluate the big picture of their relationship as opposed to the present crisis. They both said they had been an "8 to 9" until recently. They recognized that they had tuned in only to their feelings and had forgotten to be considerate of their differences. They left looking much revived and called 2 weeks later to say they were doing fine.

Fifteen months later Sherry and Phil came for a "consultation" session. They reported that things were going well for them individually and together. Phil had given up his business and was feeling successful at a good job. Sherry had finished her courses and was exploring starting a business of her own. They were ready to start a family and wanted to be sure their relationship was solid enough. They estimated that they had three to four fights a year at this point but that these were much less emotionally draining and resolved much sooner. On a scale of 1 to 10, they agreed they were generally at an 8 to 9. I wondered what their expectations were for a good relationship, and they both admitted they would like a guarantee of perfect harmony, if possible. I told them how impressed I was that they had reduced their conflict to so few times a year, and we reviewed what they needed to know and do to keep things as mutually satisfying as possible.

Four years later Sherry and Phil returned for one session. They now had a 2½-year-old son and had come because they felt "rejected and not respected" by each other. Once again, when I asked scaling questions, they quickly recognized that their lives had become unusually stressful but that, overall, their relationship was going well. Sherry had started a business of her own, which was doing well but required a lot of her time and energy. Phil was working full-time and was keeping books for Sherry's business on the side. They both wanted to spend as much time as possible with their son, and they had had no time alone as a couple for several months. This time I hardly had to ask a question. They realized what the solution was and said they would have to keep a sign on their refrigerator for the future to remind themselves that they have to make time for each other regularly, but especially when things got rough.

CONCLUSIONS

The following outlines 10 useful steps for achieving time-effective outcomes in solution-focused couple therapy (after Friedman, 1997).

1. Tune-in to the couple's affect and emotional experience; acknowledge and support the couple's struggle and desire for a more satisfying relationship.
2. Maintain a position of naive curiosity, optimism, and respect by actively listening to each partner's story; pay special attention to

3. Be on the look-out for evidence of change or success. Listen for stories that offer hope.
4. Stay simple and focused, listening for exceptions (i.e., contradictions to the problem-saturated story). When a problem or pattern seems to have taken on a life of its own, engage in externalizing conversations, defining the pattern as an outside force that is oppressing, subjugating, or constraining forward movement.
5. Stay tuned to the couple's goal: What does each partner see as reflecting a positive outcome? What does each partner hope to accomplish?
6. Negotiate with the couple to frame the outcome or goals in clear observable terms.
7. Build on strengths, competencies, successes, and resources.[3] Invite the couple to tune in to exceptions to the problem.
8. Introduce ideas (tasks, homework) that create space for the couple to "do something different." Encourage small steps and support the couple's creativity.
9. Encourage action/practice outside the therapy room. Define the change process as hard work and applaud small steps taken in a positive direction.
10. Ask pivotal questions that embed changes in the couple's experience. Compliment the couple on positive steps taken. If the goal is not attained, begin the cycle again. Leave the door open for future contact.

Figure 13.3 presents some helpful "do's" and "don'ts" in solution-focused therapy with couples.

A WORD ABOUT MANAGED CARE AND THERAPIST ACCOUNTABILITY

As we're all aware, the managed care movement in the United States has had a major impact on the way mental health services are delivered. The move from therapy as a cottage industry to the industrialization of mental health care has been rapid indeed (Cummings, 1991). Issues of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness have grown more prominent in the interest of containing costs.

One of our responsibilities as therapists is to be accountable for the work we do. To assure this accountability, we need to systematically monitor outcomes in therapy. One simple way to assess progress is by

DO

STAY joined with both partners at all times, and agree with both their points of view in the summation message.

FREQUENTLY ask each partner for his or her point of view about what the other said to keep them both involved and to keep yourself from becoming partial to one side.

TRY to find common agreement, no matter how small.

INQUIRE about their sexual relationship; they expect you to!*

HAVE them define goals in small steps and in behavioral terms.

BE sure to get agreement from both partners about the treatment plan.

DON'T

EVER believe a relationship is hopeless by the way a couple presents their situation.

SEE them together, if they have mutually exclusive goals.

SEE them together, if they fight continually.

LET one partner tell you secrets about the other over the phone.

HAVE a separate session with one partner without inviting the other in for a separate session as well.

WORK with a couple if one partner has confided in you about an ongoing affair that he/she does not want to end.

FIGURE 13.3. Do's and don'ts. Copyright Eve Lipchik, ICF Consultants, Inc., Milwaukee, WI. Reprinted by permission. *SF: This is a "don't" for me unless one partner brings it up for discussion. I have found that this subject will naturally emerge if it is relevant to our work and/or part of the couple's agenda in coming for therapy.

self-assessment of progress along a defined scale. Using scaling questions makes a great deal of sense, since it is the client's reported satisfaction with progress that should determine whether the therapy has been successful. We refer the reader to Ogles, Lambert, and Masters (1996) for information on a variety of useful instruments to track change in therapy and assess client satisfaction.

The solution-focused therapies, as exemplified in the clinical situation presented here, offer a set of principles and methods that allow us to practice with integrity while providing quality time-effective service. We understand that keeping people in therapy beyond what is needed is costly both financially and psychologically. As competency-based therapists who do not use the language of pathology and psychiatric diagnosis, we have learned to be bilingual (Hoyt & Friedman, 1998) by translating our terms and ideas into a language that the managed care company can understand.

By focusing, as we do, on alliance building, co-constructing goals for therapy, using specific and tailored homework assignments, and assessing outcome, we offer a "user-friendly" therapy that both supports clients' goals and meets the objectives of managed care companies.

NOTES

1. For examples of the application of solution-focused thinking to work with couples, see de Shazer and Berg (1985); Friedman (1993a, 1996); Hoyt and Berg (1997); Hudson and O'Hanlon (1991); and Weiner-Davis (1992).
2. SF: I don't, as a usual practice, see each partner separately. There are, however, two situations in which I would: (1) if one partner appears to be intimidated in the presence of the other; and (2) if there is a reasonable possibility that an affair is occurring.
3. We can learn a great deal about the importance of attending to strengths by listening to the voices of our clients. Chasin, Grunebaum, and Herzig (1990) present the interviews of four prominent therapists with the same couple. When that couple was contacted 6 months after these interviews, the following remarks were made. The wife reported: " . . . I think the major objection I had with the four interviews was that *nobody really emphasized any of the positive things in our relationship*. . . . It made me feel a little bit empty and insecure afterwards because they were always emphasizing 'Well, what are the problems in the relationship. . . . [which] led to a reiteration of all the problems' " (p. 367). The husband, agreeing with his wife, went on to say, that "One of the things that struck me was, Why didn't anybody ask us if we love each other or why we'd been together for 10 years? . . . I think that [the positives in our relationship] could have been stressed more that [they were]" (p. 367).

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